

Walking among gods: Virgil in a landscape garden

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The gardens at Stourhead in Wiltshire were largely created by Henry Hoare between 1744 and 1770. Walking through a dense stand of trees from the house, you soon catch sight of a tiny white classical temple through the dark branches. The Temple of Apollo, dedicated to the sun god, has a domed rotunda and Corinthian columns. Closer down toward the level of the lake and reflected in its still waters nestles the Pantheon, modelled on the Roman building most admired in eighteenth-century Europe. These are the focal points in a living landscape, radically altered by a wealthy sophisticate during a period of brilliant innovation in grand-scale garden design.

Hoare drew on fashionable ideas of landscape gardening inspired by the Grand Tour so commonly undertaken by gentlemen of the day, which invariably culminated among the classical remains of Italy. He created his own self-contained world centred around the lake (formed by damming the river). It is a world of surprisingly varied terrains, connected by paths running at different levels around the lakeside. These provide wide or enclosed views, in towards the water or out towards the surrounding countryside, and adorned with classical temples and features characteristic of Italian renaissance gardens, such as grottoes and caverns. The eye is carefully directed by the dense planting, as the viewer travels the circuit of the lake, and the plan of the whole area is gradually revealed as a supreme example of Nature organised by Art.

Stourhead is dedicated to pagan deities and heroes, Aeneas and Hercules in particular. There is no explicit sculptural programme, but there is a theme which is announced by the inscription over the door of the Temple of Flora: *procul o procul este, profani*, 'Begone, begone, O you who are uninitiated'. In Vergil's *Aeneid*, from which they are cited, these are the words of the sybil who is about to take Aeneas on a journey to the Underworld to view the future of the Roman Empire. The same quotation was inscribed over the entrance to the Pope's Belvedere Garden in Rome, where the choicest examples of ancient sculpture were kept. For Hoare and his contemporaries, then, they symbolised entrance into a world of culture and taste that could only be appreciated by people with classical learning. Significantly many of the statues that stand in the gardens at Stourhead, such as the Apollo on the lawn in front of the house, are reproductions of the original Belvedere collection, considered in the eighteenth-century to be the masterpieces of ancient art.

The Temple of Flora is designed as a small classical temple with four columns of Tuscan Doric order and a frieze of triglyphs and metopes surrounded by a pediment. Below it are the remains of a rocky grotto over Paradise well, built to honour the source of the river. In the cave of the spring below the grotto sits a painted lead statue of a sinewy old river god, whose image seems to have been modelled on an etching of the Tiber visiting Aeneas in a dream. In the *Aeneid*, he is described as 'rising among poplar leaves, clad in a cloak of grey-green linen and with reeds shading his hair'. The grotto itself houses a sleeping nymph, a copy of a statue of Ariadne (again in the Belvedere collection). Over the entrance was an inscription (no longer visible): *intus aquae dulces vivoque sedilia saxo, / Nympharum domus*. These lines, cited from *Aeneid* Book 1, translate literally as 'sweet waters within, and seats of living rock, the home of the nymphs'. The

Stourhead grotto is being assimilated to the cave of the nymphs where Aeneas lands in north Africa, in the course of his flight from Troy.

The positioning of the Pantheon seems to have been inspired by a picture by Claude Lorrain, which was itself inspired by the *Aeneid*. His *Coast view of Delos with Aeneas* (now in the National Gallery) shows a Pantheon, Doric portico and bridge in much the same relation to one another as we find at Stourhead. Aeneas, his father Anchises and son Ascanius stand with the king and priest Anius on the terrace at Delos where, in the *Aeneid* Aeneas is made to cry: 'Give us our home, Apollo; give walls to the weary, and a race and a city that will endure' (3.85-6) -- a prayer that would have resonances for Henry Hoare, too, who was attempting to establish a family seat at Stourhead, just as the wandering Trojans were in search of a place to found their city. The Pantheon itself is the climax of the journey around the lake; it serves as a halfway point, visible from the beginning of the circuit and providing a resting point to look back over the Temple of Flora and the Palladian bridge. A rotunda (evoking the famous Rotunda in Rome), it is adorned with statues of Venus and Bacchus in its outside niches, as well as others of Flora, Diana, Isis and Livia as Ceres within. Its centrepiece, however, is a copy of the famous Farnese Hercules in Rome. In the *Aeneid*, it is Hercules whose festival is being celebrated by Evander when Aeneas visits the site of Rome. Hercules had a special association with gardens for the Romans and was, during the renaissance, a favourite moral hero. The story (first found in Xenophon) of his choice at the crossroads between the easy downhill path and the high mountainous one was taken to symbolise every man's choice between pleasure and virtue. His presence in the garden, then, gives the visitor's choice of route an added, allegorical layer of moral meaning.

The gardens at Stourhead use the *Aeneid* (and its associations for eighteenth-century viewers) in a powerful and imaginative way. Both the garden and the literary epic, in their different ways, use the theme of travel to explore a range of literary and symbolic associations, and a variety of hidden moral and political meanings. The viewer's thoughtful reflection on the surroundings is built into the landscape at Stourhead: the buildings certainly form part of the landscape to be viewed from afar, but they are also meant to be reached, providing resting places for contemplation (as well as shelter from the rain). Journeying through this landscape of learning and allusion, you walk among gods in the person of a hero.

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